

“Determined to Prove a Villain”: An Examination of Shakespeare’s Evil Masterminds

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Abstract

Villains abound in popular culture. In literature, theatre, film, and television, audiences have encountered innumerable characters that they love to hate. Driven by a desire to understand what makes evildoers so compelling, I turn to the creator of some of the greatest archetypal villains--William Shakespeare. In a study of four Shakespearean villains--Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), Edmund (*King Lear*), Richard (*Richard III*), and Iago (*Othello*)--I identify traits that set these characters apart from other malefactors in Shakespeare's works. I look specifically at how these four characters separate themselves from their own world to create a guileful bond with audience: a bond that significantly contributes to their perceived effectiveness as villains.

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“Determined to Prove a Villain”: An Examination of Shakespeare’s Evil Masterminds

Popular culture loves villains. From Vader to Voldemort, contemporary film, television, and literature have created a wealth of characters we love to hate. In 2003, the American Film Institute even published a list of the top 50 cinematic villains of all time and lists abound expounding on the greatest literary villains. What drives this cultural obsession with villainy and why are we drawn to characters that behave heinously?

In order to better understand the modern audience’s affinity for villains, I am looking to one of the best original creators of villains—William Shakespeare. For centuries, scholars and critics have discussed Shakespeare and his plays and amongst the wealth of Shakespearean criticism are a multitude of analyses and studies of the individual characters that the Bard created. Some of the most compelling and perplexing characters in Shakespeare’s canon are his villains. Many scholars in the early 20th century address the construction of Shakespearean evildoers and, although contemporary discussion of the issue has quieted in comparison, authors such as Richard Raatzch and Maurice Charney are still participating in and expanding on previous conversations regarding the wicked characters in the canon.

Shakespeare wrote many villains; however, within this study, I focus specifically Iago (*Hamlet*), Richard (*Richard III*), Edmund (*King Lear*), and Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), four of Shakespeare’s villains that position themselves as outsiders, uniquely separated from the world of the play. The performance of a play is a conversation between stage and audience and a key distinction of Shakespearean drama is that characters break the fourth wall. However, it is the way in which these four characters break the fourth wall that distinguishes them from other Shakespearean villains. The evildoers that I have chosen to study separate themselves from the

other characters and, instead, form a conspiratorial bond with the audience. In effect, the villains have more connection to the audience than the world they inhabit and it is this connection that makes these villains so compelling to audiences.

Throughout this thesis, I will study the ways in which Iago, Edmund, Richard, and Aaron isolate themselves from the worlds of their plays and forge bonds with their audiences. I argue that this separateness from the play and connection to the audience is what makes these four villains such exemplary models of effective and compelling villains even four hundred years after their creation. It is my hope that understanding such archetypal villains will provide insight into the cultural fascination with evil characters.

In order to understand the cultural fascination with villains, I must first define the term. A villain is a “scoundrel, rogue, or rascal” (Crystal, “Villain”) that acts maliciously towards others. Such characters abound in the works of William Shakespeare and an abundance of scholarly discussion exists that seeks to identify the qualities and characteristics that build compelling characters capable of evil actions. Throughout the conversation regarding Shakespeare’s malefactors most scholars have agreed upon a set of characteristics that Shakespearean villains share. The following qualities are applicable to all of Shakespeare’s evildoers; however, in order to find the most effective examples of Shakespearean villainy, I will look beyond these characteristics, using them as the foundation for a villain that some of Shakespeare’s characters build upon to reach an extreme in evilness unmatched by the Bard’s other characters.

Scholars observe the necessity for villains to possess a sense of self-importance and strong will. In the introduction to his book *Shakespeare's Villains*, Maurice Charney describes villains as “creatures of will... fixated on themselves as the center of the universe” (xii). Villains in Shakespeare’s plays pursue their own plans, often disregarding or dismissing the opinions or

input of others. Macbeth is a prime example of egocentric action. Although he originally conspires with his wife, he alters the plan and kills characters not previously included in their scheme, such as Duncan's guards and later Banquo and Lady Macduff. The egocentric worldview of Shakespeare's villains contributes to their cynicism. Villains lack a "belief in anything greater than themselves," looking down on others, especially women, and often demonstrating a skeptical view of religion. Some villains, such as Edmund in *King Lear* and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, are self-declared atheists; other villains, such as Caliban in *The Tempest* and Macbeth, follow superstitious beliefs that allow them to rank themselves as a superior being. Robert Jeremy McNamara best encapsulates the worldview of Shakespearean villains, describing it as "egocentric, cynical, realistic, naturalistic, materialistic, [and] atheistic" (iv).

Intellect is another quality that scholars agree Shakespearean villains share. Such characters view themselves as intellectually superior to their peers and demonstrate considerable contempt for their victims' credulity (Charney xiii). Soliloquy and monologue are important to many Shakespearean villains as a method for the characters to showcase their eloquence (xiii). Robert Jeremy McNamara examines Shakespeare's villains specifically as cerebral and cogitative in his thesis appropriately titled *Shakespeare's Intellectual Villains*. McNamara argues that reason, rather than passion, guides villains and that these characters are "adept at creating stratagems, employing verbal ambiguities, and utilizing deceit for their own advantage" (iv).

Nearly all modern scholars discuss the issue of motivation amongst Shakespeare's villains. Motivation obviously factors in Shakespeare's development of villains--the characters must have some cause to undergo such evil deeds (Coe 21) and villains go to great lengths to justify themselves to the audience and win audience approval (Charney xiii). Twentieth and

twenty-first century scholars question the validity of the motivations provided to justify wrong doings and some scholars view some villains' causes as less fully developed, Iago and Aaron for example (Coe 35). Yet, regardless of the efficacy of the miscreants' justifications of their actions, contemporary criticism establishes that a cause driving evildoers' actions is a necessary quality in Shakespearean villains.

Here, I have shown qualities that scholars agree factor in the characterization of Shakespeare's villains. In the Bard's plays, malicious characters share traits--egocentric worldview, superior intellect, and a desire to justify their wrong doings. However, I propose that there are certain villains who possess qualities beyond these commonly held traits that distinguish them as Shakespeare's most extreme models of villainy, largely through their disconnection from the world of the play and the bond they create with the audience. In examining the qualities shared by these four characters, I hope to provide new insight into how their separation from other characters combines with their level of connection to the audience, making them the most compelling villains for audiences to watch.

As I have already shown, scholars have traced qualities of villains that encompass a multitude of Shakespeare's characters. In this study, however, I am limiting my focus to investigate characters that I argue are the masters of villainy. The first step in narrowing my concentration is a consideration of genre. I have chosen to focus solely on characters in Shakespeare's tragedies and histories. Tragedies heighten the potential for villains to succeed in their plots; the very definition of "tragedy" involves a "fatal or disastrous conclusion" ("Tragedy"). Audiences expect Shakespearean tragedies, and many histories which Maurice Charney argues are "tragic in feeling" (xiv), to end with fatalities—fatalities that the villains are likely to play pivotal roles in causing. In contrast, villains in comedies serve as "blocking agents

to prevent the course of true love from running too smoothly” (Charney, xiv). Because audiences know that Shakespearean comedies end happily (typically with a marriage), they expect comedic villains to fail, lessening the fear or anxiety of the potential for the villains’ success. As this thesis argues that the interest and intrigue audiences feel for villains stems from the villains’ acquisition of their goals, eliminating characters that audiences expect to fail is necessary.

Additionally I have chosen to focus on villains that isolate themselves from other characters in the plays while simultaneously making the audience complicit in their evil schemes. Villains manipulate other characters to achieve their goals, yet they also insist upon their separateness from those characters. The villains lie and withhold information from other characters, distrusting all they encounter within the world of the play. However, these same secretive and conniving characters divulge their plans in full to the audience, an entity that has no power to alter the course of events. By forcing the audience into complicity with their plots, villains obtain a place of power over the audience that other characters cannot claim and the audience’s inability to thwart the villains only increases the characters’ evilness. Although characters such as *Hamlet*’s Claudius and *Julius Caesar*’s Cassius conspire against others, they do not go to any lengths to separate themselves from those they manipulate and the audience shares in their plots primarily through their conversations with other characters, rather than conspiratorial asides and monologues.

Another important quality of the villains within this study is their manipulation of trust and emotions. The most compelling villains manage not only to manipulate other characters’ actions, but their trust as well. Unlike Cornwall in *King Lear*, who is without question of a despicable character even to others in the play, the villains in this study gain the trust of other characters and use that trust to create turmoil and despair. This manipulation of trust is most

evident in the epithets used for the villains throughout the play, as well as other characters' dialogue with and about the villains.

The final quality which I will argue is found in the most effective of Shakespeare's villains is the characters' embrasure and delight in their roles as villain. Shakespeare wrote a multitude of characters of questionable nature that engage in immoral acts—Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, Goneril, Regan, Claudius to name just a few. However, the most villainous of Shakespeare's characters unabashedly acknowledge the evilness of their actions and are largely unrepentant. An acknowledged and unrepentant consciousness of wickedness marks the distinctly villainous characters, those who comprehend the depravity of their schemes and yet choose to pursue them anyway.

Of Shakespeare's characters, four stand out as exhibiting all of the previously detailed traits. *Titus Andronicus*'s Aaron, *King Lear*'s Edmund, *Richard III*'s Richard (also called Duke of Gloucester), and *Othello*'s Iago fit all of the parameters of this study. As characters from Shakespeare's tragedies or histories, they isolate themselves from other characters, involve the audience in their plots through asides and monologues, manipulate others' trust, and openly delight in their villainous roles. My study of these four will demonstrate that their self-actualized roles as outsiders more connected to the audience than their own world makes them the most effective of Shakespeare's villains.

Throughout this study, I intend to analyze how certain villains separate themselves from the world they inhabit, while also forming a unique bond with the audience. The four villains I am examining--Aaron, Edmund, Richard, and Iago--achieve this isolation from other characters in the play while concurrently including the audience in their schemes. This quality stems from the intellectual superiority that villains believe they possess and use to separate and isolate

themselves from the other characters. The evil characters acknowledge that other characters are necessary for the success of their schemes. However, the evildoers make a point to share their contempt for their victims' credulity with the audience, emphasizing their disconnection from the other characters in the play. Acting almost as puppeteers controlling the actions of their victims, the villains inhabit a space outside of the world of the play, more connected to the audience than other characters.

Throughout *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron exhibits a highly sardonic nature, frequently mocking his victims (Charney 28). Aaron jokes to the audience as he prepares to cut off Titus's hand in 3.1 (lines 199-204) and compares the murdered nurse to a slaughtered pig in 4.2 (line 145). As he relates the extent of his evil deeds to Lucius in 5.1, Aaron shares his scorn for Titus's credulity:

I played the cheater for thy father's hand,
And when I had it drew myself apart,
And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter.
I pried me through the crevice of a wall
When for his hand he had his two sons' heads,
Beheld his tears, and laughed so heartily
That both mine eyes were rainy like to his[.] (5.1.111-118)

Aaron sees his dastardly deeds as a joke played upon credulous victims. His scornful mocking distances him from those he torments, differentiating and isolating Aaron from his peers, violent though they may be.

Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is more vocal to the audience in his derision of those he manipulates than is Aaron. Edmund's first major interactions with both Edgar and

Gloucester occur in 1.2 as he creates the rift between father and son through a forged letter and advice urging Edgar to establish distance from Gloucester. After talking to both Gloucester and Edgar, Edmund derides his family's trusting nature:

A credulous father, and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms,
that he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy! (1.2.163-66)

Like Aaron, Edmund associates credulity with foolishness. Edmund views Gloucester and Edgar's trust as weakness, albeit a weakness that allows his plans to succeed.

In *Richard III*, Richard manipulates numerous characters in his efforts to obtain the crown. Richard turns his father against Clarence to have his brother imprisoned and murdered; promises, and later reneges, the Duke of Buckingham an earldom in exchange for his help ascending to the throne; sends Tyrrel to murder Prince Edward and the Duke of York; and persuades Queen Elizabeth to let him marry her daughter. In all his schemes, Richard separates himself from those he manipulates, viewing them as insignificant pawns in his pursuit. One such character is Anne, who agrees to marry Richard in 1.2 despite her initial ill will towards him. Richard professes his love for Anne, but after she agrees to the marriage he reveals to the audience that she is merely a means to an end, stating, "I'll have her, but I won't keep her long" (1.2.217). In *Speak the Speech*, Rhona Silverbush and Sami Plotkin describe Richard's treatment of Anne as a game of chess: "Anne is an important piece on the chessboard: formerly his opponent's pawn, she must now be Richard's queen to maneuver strategically about the board until she can be sacrificed (once he's king)" (200). Following Anne's agreement to the marriage, Richard immediately negates his declarations of love by informing the audience of his

indifference to Anne beyond her usefulness to further his ambitions. Richard's indifference to Anne is exemplary of the way in which he distinguishes and separates himself from those around him, thus isolating himself from the world he inhabits.

Perhaps the most vocal character in separating himself from those he manipulates is *Othello's* Iago. Throughout the course of the play, Iago manipulates all the central characters in his efforts to destroy Othello's happiness. Iago feigns loyalty to Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo, promising each man to aid in his pursuits--Othello, in discovering Desdemona's infidelity; Cassio, in regaining Othello's favor; and Roderigo, in obtaining Desdemona--while secretly plotting to ruin them all. Throughout his schemes, Iago expresses disdain for the characters he manipulates. Iago voices his contempt for Othello's trusting nature early in the play:

The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are. (1.3.381-84)

Iago's compares Othello to an ass, which in the sixteenth century was a symbol of stupidity (Wyrick 433). Much like Aaron and Edmund, Iago views trust as attributable to fools and derides Othello for his credulity.

Iago's treatment of Roderigo further demonstrates the need Iago feels to separate himself from those he manipulates. Throughout the play, Roderigo serves as Iago's pawn and agent in the villain's plot for revenge. Yet, Iago ensures the audience understands that his companionship with Roderigo exists to benefit Iago's purposes and goals and does not reflect any personal affinity on Iago's part towards Roderigo:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse--

For I mine own gained knowledge should profane

If I would time expend with such a snipe

But for my sport and profit. (1.3.365-68)

Again, Iago believes that he is intellectually superior to Roderigo and would debase his genius if his interactions with a dupable fool such as Roderigo did not further his schemes. Iago further demonstrates his indifference to Roderigo in 5.1 when he states, “Now whether he [Roderigo] kill Cassio/ Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,/ Every way makes my gain” (5.1.12-14). Like Richard with Anne, Iago treats Roderigo as a means to an end. Iago shares this callous statement with the audience as proof of his detachment from those that he manipulates. The villains isolate themselves from other characters in the plays; however, they utilize direct addresses to form a bond with the audience, an entity with no power to effect the villains’ plans, divulging detailed explanations of their plots. Sharing their schemes forces the audience into complicity because the audience has knowledge of how the villains plan to enact evil, but is incapable of intervening or thwarting the villains. In the cases of Aaron, Edmund, and Richard, each man’s first substantial dialogue is an address to the audience. Aaron, upon first addressing the audience, reveals his illicit affair with Tamora (2.1.1-24) and later drops hints to the audience regarding his plan to frame Quintus and Marius (2.3.1-9). Similarly, Edmund quickly reveals his deceit to the audience, telling the audience, “[I]f this letter speed,/ And my invention thrive, Edmund the base/ Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper” (1.2.19-21). Edmund indicates the importance of the letter in his plan to claim inheritance. Later, in 5.1 Edmund shares the details of his plan to use Goneril and Albany to achieve his own objectives:

Now then we’ll use

His countenance for the battle[...]

As for the mercy
Which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia,
The battle done, and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon; for my state
Stands on me to defend, not to debate. (5.1.63-69)

Edmund tells the audience Goneril and Albany are pawns in his plot to secure power and also reveals his intention to condemn Cordelia and Lear. The audience then becomes complicit in Edmund's wrongdoings because of its intimate knowledge of his plot.

Richard III opens with a direct address from the title character, in which he reveals part of his plan to obtain regnal power. Richard involves the audience in his intrigues, discussing how he intends to eliminate the heir to King Edward's throne:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams
To set my brother Clarence and the King
In deadly hate the one against the other.
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle false and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mewed up
About a prophecy which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be. (1.1.32-40)

Richard provides full detail of his plan, including the charge on which Clarence will be imprisoned. Richard continues this practice of divulging his plans to the audience throughout the play, providing the audience with the most information of any of the four villains in this study.

Iago presents a slightly different case than the previous three villains. Unlike Aaron, Edmund, and Iago who immediately begin sharing details of their intrigues with the audience, Iago refrains from addressing the audience for an entire act. When Iago does decide to engage the audience, he offers detail to match that of Richard. In 2.3, Iago describes how he plans to destroy the relationships among Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio:

Whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:
That she repeals him for her body's lust,
And by how much she strives to do him good
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all. (327-36)

The thoroughness of Iago's explanation of his schemes provides the audience full understanding of Iago's depraved actions throughout the play, adding to the sense of complicity in the villain's plots. Iago's original reluctance to address the audience does not undermine the level of audience engagement in his plots; rather, such restraint stems from Iago's distrustful nature and his choice to confide in the audience may suggest a kinship between villain and audience.

Each of the four villains in this study call attention to their separation from the other characters surrounding them. Their disdain for the credulity of their victims isolates them from the world they inhabit, while their addresses breaking the fourth wall create a conspiratorial bond

between villain and audience. This role as outsider uniquely connected to the audience further develops through the villains' manipulation of trust as well as their delight in their wicked roles, enhancing the perceived evilness of their characters.

In contrast to their puppeteer-like role controlling the actions of other characters, these four men also act as players within their own world to exploit others' trust. Although the villains interact intimately with their victims as they manipulate their trust, the audience sees these interactions as a performance. Viewing these manipulations as performance emphasizes the evildoers' isolation from the world they inhabit, accentuating how these characters stand apart from their peers.

Of the four villains in this study, Iago is arguably the most trusted throughout the play. As Maurice Charney states in *Shakespeare's Villains*, "Iago is almost officially sealed as 'honest Iago,' an adjective that is repeated...without any irony, except for the audience" (5). In fact, the terms "honest" and "honesty" appear in association with Iago nearly twenty-five times throughout the course of the play. The repeated use of "honest" in connection to Iago underscores his manipulation of others' trust. When dealing with Othello, Iago is an expert at insinuating and hinting while never fully stating the ideas and concerns he wishes to plant in Othello's mind, particularly in 3.3. As Cassio leaves Desdemona, Iago casually comments to Othello, "Ha! I like not that," drawing Othello's attention to the interaction in a seemingly off-hand manner(3.3.33). When Othello asks what Iago said, Iago simply replies, "Nothing my lord. Or if, I know not what" (3.3.35). Iago continues this pattern of reluctant divulgence of his thoughts and opinions, raising concerns for Othello and then refusing to answer Othello's questions, often repeating Othello:

Iago: Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,

Know of your love?

Othello: He did from first to last. Why dost thou ask?

Iago: But for a satisfaction of my thought,

No further harm.

Othello: Why of thy thought, Iago?

Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

Othello: O yes, and went between us very oft.

Iago: Indeed?

Othello: Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that?

Is he not honest?

Iago: Honest, my lord?

Othello: Honest? Ay, honest.

Iago: My lord, for aught I know.

Othello: What dost thou think?

Iago: Think, my lord?

Othello: Think, my lord? By heaven, thou echo'st me

As if there were some monster in thy thought

Too hideous to be shown! (3.3.96-112)

In this conversation, Iago leads Othello to suspect Cassio without ever making an accusation, simply through repeating Othello's own questions. Iago "leav[es] crucial points suspended, so that Othello seems to be answering himself (Charney 5). Iago employs the same reluctance again when he tells Othello of Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello demands proof of Desdemona's infidelity six times before Iago finally tells him of hearing Cassio supposedly sleep-talking about

Desdemona and finding her handkerchief in Cassio's possession. Iago's assumed reluctance to share accusatory thoughts or evidence with Othello gains Othello's trust and allows Iago to manipulate Othello more easily throughout the play. The performative nature of Iago's cunning highlights his isolation from the world of *Othello*, demonstrating that he plays a role within the world, rather than genuinely existing in that domain.

Edmund's manipulation of trust is best seen through the actions of other characters, rather than specific epithets or dialogue. Gloucester does address Edmund as his "loyal and natural" son (2.1.85) and Cornwall expounds on Edmund's "virtue and obedience" (2.1.114) and his "nature of deep trust" (2.1.116). However, it is Edmund's handling of the forged letter in 1.2 that best demonstrates his ability to manipulate the trust of others, particularly his father. Edmund behaves quite similarly to Iago in 3.3 of *Othello* as he reveals the forged letter to Gloucester (Charney 90). Like Iago, Edmund assumes a reluctant attitude in allowing his father to read the letter, making Gloucester ask three times before he hands the letter over. Once his father has read the contents, Edmund offers ambiguous answers, allowing Gloucester to answer to his own questions. Such fained loyalty to both his father and his brother's good name earns Edmund Gloucester's trust.

Although Aaron takes less opportunity to toy with other characters' trust, typically opting for brazen declarations of his villainy (which will be discussed later in this study), he does occasionally manipulate the trust of others. For example, when Aaron persuades Titus cut off his hand in what Aaron knows to be a futile attempt to save Martius and Quintus, Titus addresses Aaron as both "gentle" and "good Aaron" (3.1.157; 192). The epithet of "gentle" is especially notable in the case of Aaron because of his status as a Moor. As a Moor, Aaron is a character of lower status and rank, meaning that Titus does not mean "gentle" as "well-born" or a comment

on Aaron's social status, but rather as "friendly [or] kind" in a comment on Aaron's nature (Crystal, "Gentle"). Aaron does not often disguise his manipulations, but as in this scene, he is able to wield others' trust to his advantage.

Richard poses an interesting conundrum in this respect. Not all characters in the play are fooled by his charm; in fact, the women of the play (Queen Elizabeth, Lady Anne, and the Duchess of York) all confront Richard about his deceitful actions, repeatedly calling him "villain" and "devil" among other names. Yet, despite their declamations against Richard, the women are incapable of swaying others against following him. Following Clarence's execution, Clarence's son speaks of how his "good uncle Gloucester" told him the news of his father's death, weeping and telling the boy to "rely on him [Richard] as on my father [Clarence]" (2.2.20-25). When the Duchess of York suggests that Richard is the cause of Clarence's death, the boy rejects her claim as unthinkable. Perhaps Richard's best manipulation of others' trust occurs in 3.7 as Richard's followers entreat him to ascend the throne. With Buckingham's help to spur on the entreaties, Richard repeatedly denies the appeals, feigning a reluctance to accept sovereignty. Buckingham does the majority of the talking; however, the other men address Richard as "his grace" (95), "good my lord" (191), and "sweet prince" (211), demonstrating their respect and esteem for Richard, rather than any fear or distrust.

In order to manipulate the trust of those around them, Iago, Edmund, Aaron, and Richard assume the role of actors within their own worlds. Rather than naturally existing with their peers, these villains adopt fallacious personas to interact with others. The performative nature of their interactions highlights these characters' isolation from their world by suggesting that they do not genuinely belong.

In addition to isolating themselves through direct address to the audience and the performative nature of their manipulations of trust, the four characters that I have chosen to study punctuate their separateness from their world through their unabashed acknowledgement of their villainy. These four characters make no qualms about their roles as villains. Each of these men act with full consciousness of the wickedness of their actions and, for the most part, show no remorse for their evil deeds. This shameless acknowledgement of their depravity marks Richard, Iago, Edmund, and Aaron as distinctly villainous amongst Shakespeare's evildoers, fully aware of, yet undeterred by, the baseness of their actions. Their open declamations of wickedness, specifically addressed to the audience, stress their disparity from other characters in the plays and assert the villains' separateness from those characters.

Richard claims his role as villain at the very outset of *Richard III*. In his first address to the audience at the beginning of 1.1 he reveals that "since I cannot prove a lover/ To entertain these fair well-spoken days,/ I am determinèd to prove a villain" (1.1.28-30). Having accepted his role as villain, Richard embarks on his murderous quest for power. It is not until 5.5 that Richard expresses any genuine feelings of conscience or concern regarding his actions. Following a terrible dream, Richard reflects on the evils he has committed, acknowledging feelings of conscience (5.5.131-160). However, Richard dismisses the pangs of conscience that began to surface in his dream, stating in the following scene, "Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls./ Conscience is but a word that cowards use,/ Devised at first to keep the strong in awe" (5.6.38-40). Not only does Richard associate conscience with cowardice, but he describes dreams as "babbling," suggesting that the compunction he felt is the result of nonsense or foolishness, and is therefore meaningless.

Unlike the other three characters in this study, Iago never explicitly defines himself as villain. Instead, he creates rhetorical arguments that demonstrate his awareness of the wickedness of his plots, but also support the other characters' perceptions of him as honest. In 2.3, Iago argues that his advice for Cassio to win back Othello's favor through Desdemona is "probal [wise] to thinking, and indeed the course/ To win the Moor again" (312-13). According to logic, Iago is not a villain because he actually offers Cassio good advice. However, Iago acknowledges the vileness of his advice in connection to his scheme, stating that "when devils will the blackest sins put on,/ They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,/ As I do now" (2.3.325-27). Iago admits that the charity and virtue of his actions throughout the play are merely a façade for the wickedness he is planning.

When Edmund enters discussion with the audience about his villainous role, he declares himself a willing miscreant. In 1.2 of *King Lear*, he offers his views on character:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that [...] we make guilty of our own disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity [...] and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of a whore-master man to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.
(1.2.109-122)

Edmund asserts that he is wicked entirely by choice, not by necessity or fate, and claims that attempting to deny ownership of character, be it villainous or virtuous, is foolish. Like Richard, Edmund embraces his role as a villain as a means of obtaining power and control over his world.

Edmund does stand apart as the only one of the four characters in this study to express any level of repentance for his actions. As Edmund is dying in 5.3, he confesses his orders for the execution of Cordelia and Lear, claiming that he means to do “some good” (5.3.242). However, it is important to note that Edmund also states that this confession is “despite of [his] own nature” (5.3.243). Edmund confesses and attempts to rectify one of his wrongdoings; however, he does not do so out of any feeling of compunction, but rather in direct opposition to his own character.

By far the most gleefully villainous character in this study is Aaron. As he beguiles Titus into cutting off his hand, he exclaims to the audience, “O, how this villainy/ Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!/ Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace:/ Aaron will have his soul black like his face” (3.1.201-04). Aaron finds entertainment in procuring mutilation, murder, and chaos. As Aaron reveals his insidious deeds to Lucius in 5.1, he refers to the various events as “sport,” further emphasizing the pleasure he takes in causing harm to others (5.1.96; 118). Aaron describes the murders and mutilations enthusiastically, then proceeds to flippantly regale other heinous acts he has committed, concluding by stating, “I have done a thousand dreadful things/ As willingly as one would kill a fly” (5.1.141-42). Aaron even takes his lack of repentance a step further than his fellow villains in stating that he is not only proud of his evil deeds, but that he repents any good deed he may have done (5.3.188-89). Aaron’s apathy towards his actions and sheer enjoyment in injuring others’ distinguishes him as a truly wicked character.

Richard, Iago, Edmund, and Aaron all brazenly acknowledge the evilness of their actions to the audience and show little to no guilt for their behavior. Their declarations of villainy accentuates their isolation from the world and characters of the play by asserting their distinction and separateness in nature from those around them. The choice to discuss their depravity with the

audience strengthens the bond between villain and audience by compelling the audience to share in the miscreants' schemes.

Many productions of these plays demonstrate that modern audiences are still drawn towards these villains, specifically when the actors in the roles establish the connection with the audience that the plays so strongly develop. Although every review does not address the qualities discussed in this study, several reviewers make note of the isolation of the villainous characters from the world of the play or the relationship between villain and audience, suggesting that contemporary audiences find these traits compelling.

Many reviews focus on the relationship between actor and audience. Reviews of *King Lear* and *Richard III* note the level of engagement between villain and audience. Maxwell Cooter states that Kathryn Hunter's Richard "enraptures the audience" in the Globe's 2003 production, suggesting a well-developed bond between villain and audience. In a review of the 2012 production of *King Lear* at the Rose Theatre, Laurence Vardaxglou praises the complicity Alex Woolf (Edmund) bestowed upon the audience throughout the production, stating that he "allowed the audience to engage with his motives and action" (Vardaxglou). Michael Billington, in his review of the Globe's first production of *Othello* in 2007, discusses the advantages of the Globe's intimacy in enhancing Iago's character: "Because we are privy to his plot, McInnerny [Iago] has only to turn his head away from other characters to admit us to his inner diabolism" (Billington). Likewise, a review of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2004 *Othello*, notes Antony Sher's ability to create a connection between Iago and his audience:

Sher brings a lot of humour to the performance and breaks down the wall between the stage and auditorium, directly appealing to the audience and confiding in them as they laugh at his victim's gullibility. [...] What Sher's Iago is particularly

brilliant at is the implication of the audience in the tragic events of the play. Iago implicates them by drawing them in through humour as his plans become more and more malevolent. (Wilkinson)

This review speaks specifically to Iago's ability to make the audience complicit in his schemes and argues that such a quality is instrumental to the success of the RSC production. These reviews demonstrate the connection between villain and audience in the production of these plays, not only drawing attention to the audience's complicity in the evil schemes, but also the malefactors' skill at breaking down the fourth wall in order to engage the audience and isolate themselves from the world they inhabit.

Some reviews look more in-depth at the isolation of the villains from the world they inhabit. In his review of the Oliver Parker film adaptation of *Othello*, Roger Ebert describes Kenneth Branagh's Iago as "the best thing in the movie [...] he makes Iago curiously distant from the main line of the action (Ebert). This separation from the world of the play reappears in recent stage productions as well, most notably Custom/Practice's 2011 production of *Othello*. Matthew Hemley discusses how director Suba Das created a sense of separation for Iago through staging, giving Cary Crankson's Iago "a place from which to watch the consequences of his mind games unfold--from above, like a puppeteer" (Hemley). The reviews of Iago in these two productions support the idea that a villain, such as Iago, becomes especially compelling and effective when his isolation from the world of the play is exploited.

The separation created through a villain's delight in his evil doings appears most in reviews of Aaron in productions of *Titus Andronicus*. In a play with as many violent characters as *Titus* boasts, Aaron's relish in his villainy sets him apart in many productions. Michael Billington describes Shun Oguri's Aaron as "a snickering thug delighting in pure evil" in the

RSC's 2006 production. In a *New York Times* review of the Public Lab 2011 production of *Titus*, Charles Isherwood writes, "Mr. Jones (Aaron) is like a snake walking upright, slithering out his speeches as he describes a long life of iniquity with a drooling delight" (Isherwood). In production, Aaron's embrace of his wickedness and revelry in his vileness separates and distinguishes him from the other characters surrounding him.

Not every review calls attention to the qualities that I examine in this study. However, the qualities I discuss that lead to the isolation of the villains from their world and the development of the bond between villain and audience still appear in contemporary productions of the four plays studied. The recognition of these characteristics in production reviews suggests that such traits appeal to audience and contribute to making these four villains so compelling.

Throughout this study, I have examined qualities that distinguish Aaron, Edmund, Richard, and Iago as outsiders within the worlds of their plays. While these four characters exhibit the traits common to all of Shakespeare's villains, they also possess unique characteristics that establish them as arguably the most wicked of the Bard's evildoers. Although many characters in the Shakespeare canon break the fourth wall, these four villains do so in such a way as to isolate themselves from the other characters in the play, while simultaneously forging a conspiratorial bond with the audience. Through both literary analysis and production history, I have demonstrated that the villains' connection to the audience, their manipulations of trust, and their acknowledged, yet unremorseful, consciousness of the debasement of their actions combine to set Aaron, Edmund, Richard, and Iago apart as Shakespeare's evil masterminds.

Why do we love villains? Why is contemporary culture so captivated by characters that commit abhorrent acts? The answer lies in our connection to these characters, both as outsiders and fellow conspirators. The most effective and compelling villains step back from the world

they are meant to inhabit and reach out to engage and implicate the audience in their devious plots.

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